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ABSTRACT

Songs and poems with origins in Hispanic-American cultures are presented for the classroom use of Spanish teachers. Some information about the selections, their characteristics and idiosyncracies, and their specific uses in instruction is provided. (MSE)

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Hispanic-American Songs and Poems for the Classroom

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As is the case with other Hispanic artistic manifestations in the United States, songs and poetry are not recent phenomena. The Southwest and other regions that contain sizable Hispanic populations in this country have maintained an Hispanic artistic tradition that goes back several centuries. It is a tradition inherited from the Spanish conquerors and early settlers, a tradition continuously enriched through the cultural influences of Mexico and Central and South America.

Traditional forms of Hispanic poetry still possessed great vitality in 1848 when the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hildalgo was signed.[1] Following the guidelines of this treaty, Mexico relinquished to the United States the states of New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, California, and Colorado. A study of the poetry published in nineteenth-century Spanish newspapers of these regions reveals samples of *alabados*, *posadas*, *pastorelas*, *inditas*, *trovas*, *corridos*, *décimas*, and other forms of Spanish poetry.[2] Evidence exists that in the Southwest the Hispanic people celebrated poetic tournaments in which the troubadours of several towns competed by singing or reciting original, spontaneous verses. The winners were singled out as the best poets, composers, or singers of the region.[3]

The state of New Mexico is dotted with villages whose Hispanic inhabitants have stubbornly maintained their poetic heritage through folk songs on varied themes. These songs, as well as some of the Hispanic poetry currently being produced in the United States, represent a valuable source of materials for the Spanish classroom regardless of the grade

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level. Using these materials, the teacher not only will contribute to the linguistic development of the students, but will also promote the knowledge and appreciation of the Hispanic community of the United States. According to folklorist John Donald Robb, folk music "bears the characteristic imprint not of any single individual but rather of the thoughts and emotions of a people united by such ties as language, religion, nationality, and residence" (Robb, 5, pp. 3–4). One could obviously make the same statement in reference to all artistic manifestations that emerge from a specific ethnic group.

Following are a few samples of Hispanic folk songs from New Mexico, as well as some contemporary poetry by Hispanics from Texas and Florida.

Many of the songs from New Mexico constitute "romances" whose roots can be found in Spain and in Latin America. Such is the case of "El caballerito," a song which, as Robb states, is based on two "romances," one of which is associated with the demise of the wife of Alfonso XII and the other entitled "La esposa difunta" (Robb, 5, p. 82). Following are the lyrics of this song. The score as recorded from the oral tradition by Robb may be found on pages 81–82 of *Hispanic Folk Music of New Mexico and the Southwest* (Robb, 5).

El caballerito

1

Se acabó la flor de marzo
reventó la flor de abril
se acabó la que reinaba
en la ciudad de Madrid.

2

—¿Dónde vas caballerito?
¿Dónde vas andando así?
—Voy en busca de mi esposa;
cuatro días no la vi.

3

En una playa arenosa
una blanca sombra vi
que entre más me retiraba
más se acercaba de [sic] mí.

4

Pues tu esposa es muerta ya
es verdad que yo la vi,
cuatro duques la han paseado
por la ciudad de Madrid.

5

Cásate caballerito.
Cásate, no estés así.
El [sic] primer niño que tengas,
ponle el nombre como a mí.

This song can be easily dramatized in the form of a "ronda," a singing activity in which the children hold hands forming a circle that moves counterclockwise or clockwise. Several students can participate taking turns assuming the role of the narrator and of the "caballerito." The song also offers the opportunity to give some cultural insights on the city of Madrid and to relate to the students how songs like this one arrived in New Mexico via the first Spanish settlers of that region. The linguistic material of the text can be used when working with groups of adolescents; elementary school students will enjoy the memorization and the singing of a few verses.

Another New Mexican song of well-known Spanish origin is entitled "Don gato." The United States version is much shorter than the original, "El señor don Gato," which Latin American children have sung in school for several generations. This shortness offers an advantage, for young English-speaking students can more easily memorize it. In addition, the song can be used to begin a conversation about pets or to initiate a study of the role of the extended family in Spanish societies. Here is the short version presented by Robb (Robb, 5, pp. 83–84). The score appears on pages 83–84 of *Hispanic Folk Music of New Mexico and the Southwest* (Robb, 5).

Don gato

1
Estando el señor don gato
sentadito en un tejado

Refrán
Aleyalapún, aleyalapún
¡Sobrina de un gato pardo!

2
Ha recibido una carta
que si quiere ser casado
con una gata montesa,
sobrina de un gato pardo.

In New Mexico one finds songs called simply *canciones* (songs), which are different from those that come from "romances," for they are not narrative in nature but introspective. Below is an example of a *canción* entitled "Peña" and cited by Robb (Robb, 5, pp. 208–209). With fifth- and sixth-graders, "Peña" could be used to illustrate the use of the

verb *estar* with the present participle to form the present progressive. It is also an appropriate song for junior high school students.

Peña

1
Peña del cerro alto
peña la consentida,
peña la vida mía,
morena hermosa,
no me vayas a olvidar.

2
Si estoy despierto,
si estoy morando,
si estoy durmiendo
si estoy soñando.
Siempre te estoy amando,
morena hermosa,
no me vayas a olvidar.

Another type of folk song in New Mexico is one called *indita*. Like the "romance" and the Mexico *corrido*, it is narrative in nature but it differs from these forms in several aspects. The *indita* often has a refrain and, as its name indicates, an Indian motif usually appears in its lyrics. "El comanchito," an *indita* recorded by Robb (5, p. 419), is an appropriate song for elementary school students in which the refrain imitates an Indian ceremonial chant. Following are the lyrics:

El comanchito

1
Ahí vienen los indios
por el chaparral.
Ay, nanita, ay, nanita
me quieren matar.

2
Baila el comanchito,
toca el tambor;
baila por buñuelos,
Baila por amor.[4]

Refrán
¡Jeya, jeya, jeya,
jeya, jeya, jeya,
jeya, jeya, jeyaaaaah!

When presenting "El comanchito," the teacher can mention the conflicts but stress the cooperation that existed between the Indians and the Spanish settlers of the American Southwest. It is of utmost importance to point out in the Spanish classroom that in many ways the European culture and the indigenous cultures of the Southwest blended,

forming a mixture that can be observed when traveling through the region today. This type of information makes the language more interesting and relevant to the student.

In addition to the songs listed above, which were rescued from the oral tradition by Robb, there are other sources of materials such as those found in the book *Canciones y juegos de Nuevo México/Songs and Games from New Mexico* edited by Dolores González (1). Although this book was prepared to encourage bilingual children "to express themselves in their native language as well as to enrich their cultural heritage" (Gonzáles, 1, p. 13), it can prove very useful for the Spanish classroom teacher.

In the realm of poetry, teachers can supplement their classroom activities by acquainting the students with some of the current Hispanic poets from the United States. Nephtalí De León, a Texas poet, is a good example. His *Chicano Poet* contains an ingenious, humorous poem, "Jaimito el piojo" (León, 2, p. 82), which could be used successfully in the elementary Spanish classroom, for it contains both linguistic and cultural values appropriate for young students. Moreover, this poem is skillfully illustrated by the poet himself. It reads as follows:

Era un piojito añejo
que se llamaba Juanito,
era un niño negrito y nejo
con el apodo "Jaimito."

"Jaimito" tenía patitas—
ocho grandes y dos chiquitas
dos ojillos de piojillos,
y sejillas [sic] de sapillo.

¡Era elegante y cortéz [sic]
valiente, fuerte, y ligero;
no tomaba ni jerez—
era todo un caballero!

¡Era un trovador errante
con su voz de Pedro Infante—
sus ojos siempre vivillos
en busca de ochenta pillos!

¡La damas lo veneraban,
Los piojos todos lo odiaban,

pues se decía que sus ojos
seducían hasta los gorgojos!

It is a simple, narrative poem of five stanzas whose lines exhibit perfect Spanish consonance and an abundance of diminutives and concrete terminology. The image of Pedro Infante which appears in the fourth stanza indicates that the poem is intended for Mexican-American children. Pedro Infante, an elegant, almost legendary Mexican singer, is part of the Mexican-American popular culture and a figure familiar even to young children. However, this poem also bears valuable cultural content for nonnatives and reveals, in a simple manner, some of the subtleties of the Spanish language that can go undetected by even the best students. A case in point is the connotation of the term *piojo*, which is translated as "louse" in English. The cultural image that *piojo* conveys to the Spanish mind is of a positive nature; it is the concept of "smallness" that emerges. This is why it is very possible to hear a Spanish mother calling her child affectionately "mi piojito," which would hardly be conceivable in English.

It is interesting to note that "Jaimito el piojo" presents some orthographic peculiarities; one encounters *sejillas* instead of the conventional *cejillas* and *cortéz* instead of *cortés*. This type of unconventional spelling is rather common in Mexican-American literature, and it is not difficult to discover the reasons behind this phenomenon. The great majority of Hispanics in the United States learn Spanish at home orally. Since the language they use in school is English, they seldom have the opportunity to learn their mother tongue with the discipline of speakers from Spanish-speaking countries. However, this aspect should not worry teachers, for orthographic peculiarities are easy to correct before presenting Hispanic works to students. The benefits of exposing students of Spanish to Hispanic literature from the United States outweigh many inconveniences that teachers may find with spelling. This problem is nonexistent when working with elementary school students, for oral presentations accompanied by the appropriate visuals usually turn out to be very productive at this level.

Sabine R. Ulibarrí, a New Mexican writer best known for his charming, nostalgic short stories depicting his homeland, has also written some

poetry that could be valuable for upper elementary grades and for adolescents. Below are some examples taken from his book of poems *Al cielo se sube a pie* (Ulibarrí, 7). The following poem is titled "Mima" (Ulibarrí, 7, p. 15).

VI

Mima

En tus abriles pisabas luceros;
a ti subían todas las rosas.
En tus otoños sólo pisas flores,
mas los astros bajan a tus ojos.

This poem is so short that it is quite easy to memorize. It is in itself a lucid illustration of the use of the imperfect tense in Spanish and would be appropriate for sixth-graders or for students of junior high school. Other poems by Ulibarrí (7, pp. 44, 46, 48) that can be incorporated in the Spanish learning process include the following:

XXXI

Pies de pincel
escriben historias de amor
en el cuaderno usado
de mi corazón.

XXXIII

Pie chiquito, pie exquisito
fina escultura,
bello y sólido pedestal
de dulce estructura.

XLIV

"Silencio sin ruido"
Por senda y esfera extranjera
vaga mi ansia en el espacio,
viendo, oyendo, oliendo quimeras,
la cara del alma buscando.

Poems XXXI and XXXIII, which are unusual because the central motif represents a person's feet, contain almost exclusively concrete lexical items. They can be presented in the classroom accompanied by illustrations in relation with the study of body parts. In addition, they can be easily memorized and used in choral or in individual recitations. The third poem, "Silencio sin ruido," is more appropriate for adolescents because of the abstract concepts it involves, an individual's search for a higher sphere of thought, a flight into space to find one's dreams and the

true meaning of the soul. This poem can generate an interesting discussion on the theme of daydreaming, and at the linguistic level it is an excellent example of the use of the gerund in Spanish.

Another source of children's poetry is found among the Cuban Americans. Hilda Perera, a Cuban-American writer in Florida, is currently producing children's books in Spanish. Her main purpose is to promote literacy in Spanish for Cuban-American children. These children, like Mexican-American young people, learn Spanish primarily for oral communication at home. However, with the assistance of Perera's books, children are now offered the opportunity to learn to read and write the language of their parents. The poems included in these readers contain extremely simple syllabic combinations and are marked by repetitive concrete imagery. Following are three examples taken from Perera's *La pata pita* (Perera, 4, pp. 15, 19, 29):

La mula mía
es la mula Lola.
La mula Lola
ama la loma.
¡A la loma,
a la loma,
mula Lola!

El sapo Soto
el sapo solo,
solo, solito.
Pasa la mata, solo.
Pasa la loma, solo.
¡Solo, solo, solo, solo!

Mula Lola,
la mala nena,
la nena mala,
toma al patito
y no lo ama.
¡Es una pena!

Although these poems are designed to teach reading to Spanish-speaking children, teachers of kindergarten students will find them quite useful also. Accompanied by visuals and appropriate gestures, they could be a most effective way to initiate children to the study of Spanish.

The selections offered in this paper represent only a fraction of the Hispanic songs and poems existing in the United States which Spanish teachers can use in their classrooms. Some of these compositions are quite appropriate for young children and for students of junior high school. The use of Hispanic literature from the United States in the classroom has a dual purpose: to make the language learning endeavors of the

students more pleasant and more meaningful and to promote the appreciation and understanding of the sociohistorical reality of the Hispanic-American community. The cultural and human benefits that the students receive through this type of literature are difficult to find in the usual Spanish textbooks.[5]

Notes

1. Felipe de Ortego y Gasca, "An Introduction to Chicano Poetry," in Joseph Sommers and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, eds., *Modern Chicano Writers* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1979), p. 113.
2. Tino Villanueva, *Chicanos: Anatología histórica y literaria* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1980), p. 53.
3. Salvador Rodríguez del Pino, "La poesía chicana: una nueva trayectoria," in Francisco Jiménez, ed., *Identification and Analysis of Chicano Literature* (New York: Bilingual Press, 1979), p. 69.
4. The last word in the second stanza is *licor* in the original composition. I have taken the liberty of changing it to *amor*, which does not destroy the rhyme and makes the song more suitable for children.
5. Additional information about procuring Hispanic songs and poems created in the United States may be requested from Professor Cida S. Chase, Foreign Languages and Literatures, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078-0602.

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2. León, Nephtali De. *Chicano Poet*. La Puente, CA: Sunburst Enterprises, 1973.
3. Ortego y Gasca, Felipe de. "An Introduction to Chicano Poetry," in Joseph Sommers and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, eds., *Modern Chicano Writers*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1979.
4. Perera, Hilda. *La pata Pita*. New York: Minerva Books, 1979.
5. Robb, John Donald. *Hispanic Folk Music of New Mexico and the Southwest: A Self-Portrait of a People*. Norman, OK: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1980.
6. Rodríguez del Pino, Salvador. "La poesía chicana: una nueva trayectoria," in Francisco Jiménez, ed., *The Identification and Analysis of Chicano Literature*. New York: Bilingual Press, 1979.
7. Ulibarrí, Sabine R. *Al cielo se sube a pie*. Madrid: Ediciones Alfaguara, 1966.
8. Villanueva, Tino. *Chicanos: Antología histórica y literaria*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1980.